Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition

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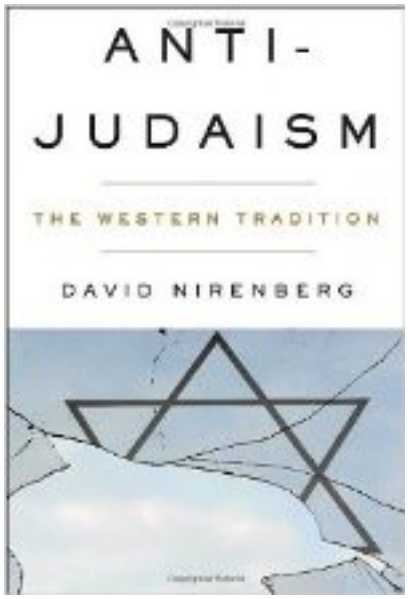
David Nirenberg:Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition.New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013.610 pp. $35.00



This is a big book, and an impressive one, eliciting many admiring reviews in the past year or so. It is also far from a simple one to review. It makes a powerful case, or a series of them, based on a richness of detail that is captivating, often dazzling. Its arguments are elaborately and subtly qualified. Many of the points the author makes appear familiar at first, yet as he develops them, they become ever more subtle. Each of his chapters demands close reading, and any one of them could form the basis for a long review. The present reviewer learned much from the book and felt obliged to rethink positions long held.

The title is problematic, perhaps unavoidably. The author, Chicago University professor David Nirenberg, appropriately if briefly reviews in his introduction things the book is *not*. He emphasizes that it is not yet another history of antisemitism ("a word that captures only a small portion ... of what this book is about")--a point that some of its reviewers seem to have ignored (p. 3).[1] *Anti-Judaism* is also *not* yet another history of the Jews, and not even about actual Jews (as distinguished from fantasies about them). It is *not* about "the Jewish question" (at least in the nineteenth-century definition of the term). It is *not* about Judaism or its critics (in the sense of Jewish religious beliefs, per se).

Finally, the book is not an effort to delineate the long-range causes of the Holocaust, if only because the author is critical of tendentious and simplistic notions of historical causation. Nonetheless, he states that Europe's mass murder of its Jewish population was "inconceivable" without the tradition of anti-Judaism (in his particular definition of it) (p. 459). Still, the shadow of the Holocaust is to be sensed throughout the book. The decision of this extraordinarily learned and thoughtful scholar to devote himself to an in-depth and wide-ranging exploration of what might be termed the intellectual dark side of Western civilization has obviously been influenced by that catastrophe, as well as by his alarm over the implications of the growing hostility in most of the

world to the state of Israel.

Anti-Judaism is a tome of 610 pages, 479 pages of text and over a hundred pages of footnotes--"*not* about" so many things! Well, actually, somehow also about them. The abstruseness of the introduction and its definitional shell game may put off some readers, but they need to be aware that these are a mere foretaste of what is to come: elaborate voyages into often shadowy realms, where inadequately prepared readers can easily lose their way, stumbling over the often tortured reasoning and arcane vocabulary of those Nirenberg is scrutinizing. He disarmingly observes that his topic is "dauntingly, even laughably, large" and he explains that he decided on the title "anti-Judaism" "for the sake of simplicity," because no single term was adequate (p. 2). Actually, "Against Jewishness" might have been less misleading, insofar as it suggests the book's exploration of nonreligious themes. Another possibility might have been "Western Civilization vs. the Jew," with "the Jew" taking on a broadly symbolic meaning (that anti-Jewish sentiments are embedded in the "genome" of Western civilization, as the dust jacket puts it). Nirenberg refers to a passage in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* as "indigestibly rich," which might also be said about parts of this volume (p. 279).

The book could be described as a provocative exploration of the intellectual foundations of Western civilization, in a very broad sense. The chapters start with ancient Egypt, Exodus, and the empires of the ancient world. The author then works his way through the years of early Christianity (with a detour to hostility directed against Jews in Islam), the European Middle Ages, Spain and the Inquisition, the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment, the French Revolution. Perhaps because of the challenges of the subject matter Nirenberg has adopted a conversational, folksy writing style, almost as if he were addressing a class of undergraduates, yet that style is oddly out of sync with the sophistication and intellectual seriousness of his topic. He writes in the first person, addressing his readers as "you," with asides such as "We must move forward in the history if I am to persuade you of that." About a quotation just cited, he observes that "We are, you will immediately have recognized, in Shakespeare's theatrical world" (p. 271).

But *will* "we" in fact immediately come to such a recognition? The sophistication about the readers implied in that remark and others like it sprinkled throughout the book, makes "talkin' to us" in this way seem an ill-chosen device. There are a few other stylistic idiosyncrasies (why are cities, such as Alexandria, referred to as "she"?), some unexplained and glaringly recondite terms, and occasionally convoluted or factually overloaded paragraphs. These mostly minor lapses seem to have escaped editorial intervention but prompted occasional head-scratching on the part of this reviewer.

That *Anti-Judaism* is distant in tone and content from *Leidensgeschichte* or the venerable "story of our sorrows" genre cannot be over-emphasized, but for all the sophisticated reasoning and assumptions in Nirenberg's chapters, their central argument might have been usefully put into a more familiar framework: Our identities (religious, cultural, national) require not only a positive element but also a negative one. For Western civilization, in Nirenberg's view, this crucial negative "other" has been "the Jew" or "Jewishness"--or "Judaism."

In particular, what interests Nirenberg is the "pathological fantasies" about the Jewish enemy that have emerged throughout Western history (p. 468). However, conceptualizing identities as inevitably containing a negative aspect, as suggested above, tends to put the assumed uniqueness of Western fantasies into a rather different light than he does. The need for a negative identity pole is a universal human trait, and is nowhere more obvious or revealing than in the Jews' understanding of their own history, with its array of defining enemies, beginning with Jacob's brother, Esau (hairy, brutish), the Egyptians (whose religion is a vile, polar opposite of Jewish religion [Gen. 8:25]), Haman (the infamous villain of the Book of Esther and a descendent of Amalek, who is in turn the symbol of absolute evil in Jewish tradition). A complete list easily fill a page. Or perhaps more than a page, since all of non-Jewish humanity (the goyim or "the [other]

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nations”), looms as a negative standard for Jewish identity: the Jews have defined themselves as a *goy kadosh* (holy nation), as distinguished from the goyim, who are “other,” not holy, having failed to recognize the one true God and His chosen people.

Could these negative visions that Jews have had of others also be termed fantasies--perhaps not pathological but at least not entirely fair or accurate? Some have argued that the peculiar quality of the unflattering stereotypes that Jews have constructed in regard to others have had something to do with the tendency of those other nations to construct peculiarly unfriendly narratives about the Jews. The point is moot, to say the least, but Nirenberg explores a somewhat different if related point, that in constructing their unfriendly narratives of the Jewish world, non-Jews of the Western tradition have tried to “make sense of ... their world” (p. 3). What he leaves relatively unexplored is the question of how much Jews have followed the same instinct to make sense of their world. Similarly, in which ways did the two fantasies differ?

No doubt, part of the difference between the two comes down to the issue of power: non-Jews have enjoyed power and worldly success, allowing them to put their hostility to Jews into effect in many ways. In contrast, the history of the Jews for the most of the last 2,500 years has been one of relative powerlessness and worldly failure, though with enduring messianic hopes and some long stretches of relative peace and prosperity. With rare, historically remote, and problematic exceptions Jews have not put their negative views of non-Jews into violent action, if for no other reason than their lack of power to do so (at least before the establishment of the state of Israel).

A related but certainly relevant complication is that the “anti-Judaic” charge (or its many equivalents) has been amply used by Jews themselves in regard to other Jews. Throughout history Jews have accused one another of violating God’s commandments (or of not being genuinely Jewish). There is a peculiar parallelism here and a distinct inclination on both sides to manipulate words and concepts with reckless abandon. Nirenberg emphasizes that in many cases those accused by non-Jews of “Judaizing” were not Jews at all, while those accused by real Jews of not being real Jews actually were--or at least thought they were--and typically returned the compliment by accusing their accusers of being the ones who were not real.

Nirenberg’s account becomes yet further paradoxical insofar as he explains that many non-Jews who were firmly in the “anti-Judaic” camp were also firm opponents of persecuting “real” Jews and staunchly opposed the misrepresentation of their “real” beliefs. Some of these non-Jews have been termed philosemites, though Nirenberg is chary of the concept, which no doubt requires more careful definition than one often encounters.

Nirenberg’s approach gives rise to the question: Was there also something about hostility to Jews (whether based on accurate perceptions or not) that offers us special insights into the *positive* achievements of Western civilization, in particular its unusual creativity? In a related way, should we not ask if there was something about Jews, their actual religious beliefs and real-life activities, that “objectively required” criticism--a criticism that then could be termed “liberating”? Many Jews in the nineteenth century declared as much, perhaps most famously Heinrich Heine in his quip that converting to Christianity was his ticket to Western civilization. A by no means small other group of Jews regarded Judaism as a prison. Julien Benda, a prominent Jewish intellectual, described traditional Jews as “blind preservers of a set of customs that have lost their meaning.”[2] Were they all in the grips of a fundamental misinterpretation of “Judaism”?

Obviously, both Jewish and non-Jewish interpreters had a job before them in trying to explain the meaning of the Old Testament, when so much of it appeared crude, incoherent, and inhumane, often reflecting Bronze Age mentalities and incoherently patched-together oral narratives that could not be accepted, or at least taken literally, by later readers, whether non-Jewish or Jewish.

Still, it is only natural to assume that the pervasive, often withering negativity in regard to Jews and

their religion on the part of the leading lights of Western civilization has been mostly negative in its results. But that conclusion has some rather complex potential ambiguities, aside from its association with *Leidensgeschichte*. In a brief preliminary treatment of Marx in the introduction, Nirenberg provocatively refers to Marx's "fundamental insight"--in an essay that most other authors have termed notoriously antisemitic ("On the Jewish Question"). In general, "what Marx really meant" has provoked a huge literature, but in this early essay his meaning is particularly obscure, since he employed a stilted and arcane philosophical jargon, one that puzzles and shocks most modern readers. He equated love of money with "Jewishness" (*Judentum*) and declared that the destruction of (Jewish) capitalism was necessary to reach the promised land of communism.

What then is the "fundamental [and presumably useful or positive] insight" that Nirenberg is referring to in the essay? He writes "that the 'Jewish question' is as much about the basic tools of and concepts through which individuals in a society relate to the world and to each other, as it is about the presence of 'real' Judaism and living Jews in that society…. 'Judaism,' then, is not only the religion of a specific people, but also a category, a set of ideas and attributes with which non-Jews can make sense of *and criticize* their world" (p. 3, my italics).

Even those versed in these matters will need to proceed into the main chapters to savor adequately what is being argued. At any rate, it seems obvious that the negatives are related to the positives, so to speak, especially insofar as Christian anti-Judaism built upon the assortment of beliefs associated with or emerging from the spiritual freedom of Christians. That freedom stood in stark contrast to the bondage of Jewish literalism, or to the letter of the Law. Western civilization's unusual, perhaps unique "freedom," openness to self-criticism, and related creativity are (or became) central to its identity, and thus to freeing itself from a sterile Judaism.

It is difficult to think of Western, Christian freedom as positive for the Jews, yet perhaps it still might have been in the limited sense that Jews were allowed to survive in Christendom (in an abased condition), as testimony to the truths of Christianity. One might also conclude, again in a very broad sense, that European freedom, creativity, self-criticism, and productivity were qualities that attracted many Jews--and to which they contributed, especially in modern times. Such figures, Jewish and not, as Spinoza, Shakespeare, Marx, Richard Wagner, and Werner Sombart, all may be said to have developed their theories or their art to some degree by "thinking (negatively) about Judaism." The result, however, was obviously not entirely negative. Each case above requires careful consideration, but that of Wagner, widely considered to be a particular obnoxious and influential antisemite, may be the most interesting: Was his beautiful music significantly inspired by his distaste for the Jews of his day (or by a deeper hostility to Judaism)? It is often forgotten that he was extremely popular with Jewish audiences in the nineteenth century. Today, some Jews cannot bear to listen to his music, but others cannot resist.

Nirenberg does not give the attention that it seems to deserve to what can be termed another fundamental insight, and related ambiguity, in Marx's thought: that it was necessary to let the "evil" capitalist (or Jewish) stage develop fully in order to reach the "good" stage of communism. So we have a bad/good capitalism, just as we have a bad/good Western civilization. This way of conceptualizing evil is to be found in many passages of the Bible and in the Judeo-Christian "mystical" interpretations of history: good emerges from evil. Joseph, who rose to become the powerful vizier to the Pharaoh, explained to his fearful brothers (who years earlier had left him in a pit to die), that "you meant evil toward me but God meant it for good," as part of His divine plan, involving Joseph's rise to power in Egypt, the settlement of the Israelites (his father, his brothers, and their retinue) in the Land of Goshen, and so on. Throughout history God's plan entailed using the (evil) hatred directed at the Israelites as a device not only to punish them but to maintain their (good) separatism from other peoples, also part of His inscrutable plan.

A number of reviewers have critically noted Nirenberg's lack of interest in Europe's philosemitic thinkers, but the issue may be seen as much deeper, in the complex moral paradoxes of "anti-

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Judaic" thought. The founders of Christianity, while denouncing fellow Jews in often harshly abusive language, at the same time embraced large parts of the Jewish worldview. They understood and accepted that God chose the Jews as His *goy kadosh*, and that He also chose to take human form as a Jew (or to have as His "only begotten son" assume that form). Paul was a Jew, and Christ's first disciples were Jews (if eventually quarreling with one another about the extent to which they remained Jews and should follow Jewish law). Christ made it quite explicit that He came to fulfill the Law, not replace it, however much his other pronouncements seemed to blur the issue.

As Nirenberg explores knowledgeably there were among later generations of the early Christians (or "christianizers") those who dismissed the Old Testament as an evil rather than a holy text (the Marcionites), but they were denounced as heretics by the church and did not survive as a major sect (unless one considers Nazism, especially as represented in the writings of Alfred Rosenberg, as a kind of rebirth of that ancient heresy). Revealingly, St. Augustine, though born and raised as a Christian, was for a while attracted to Manichaean dualism "partly out of disgust for the apparent stupidities of the Old Testament" (as Nirenberg puts it on p. 124), but he eventually reconciled himself to "Christianity's foundation in Judaism" (ibid). Protestants saw themselves as the new and true Israel, and did not suggest getting rid of the Old Testament (indeed, many focused more on it than on the New Testament). Fast-forwarding over the centuries, we know that twentieth-century British statesmen, notably Lloyd George and Lord Balfour, spoke with apparent conviction about the "debt" that Christians owed to the Jews, and both gave that as a reason for their support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. It does seem that if the "anti-Judaic" Marcionite perspective was as deep-seated as Nirenberg's thesis implies, then the survival of the Jews, let alone their remarkable rise in nineteenth-century Europe (demographically, economically, politically, and in many other regards), becomes all the more puzzling--except, perhaps, if one interprets that rise as finally unacceptable to large numbers of Europeans, with the Holocaust as the result (also part of God's inscrutable plan?).

It is widely recognized that Europe's power and attractiveness to the rest of the world in modern times had much to do with the participation of Jews in it. It is difficult to think of modern Europe without including such names as Marx, Freud, Einstein, and countless other Jewish intellectual luminaries, to say nothing of the thousands of Jewish physicians, lawyers, and entrepreneurs who contributed to its prosperity and worldly success. How did it happen that such a profoundly anti-Judaic Europe (even in its Enlightened period) conferred civil equality upon Jews and allowed their remarkable rise in the nineteenth century? How could Franz Josef, the long-term emperor of the Habsburg Empire, speak so supportively of "his Jews" (who indeed were vital to the economic well-being of his empire and were among its most ardent supporters)?

The question of course more often asked is how could the Holocaust occur in such a Europe? It might be observed that many if not most of the above Jews were "anti-Judaic" secularists or "Jewish self-haters" (an obvious point in the case of men like Leon Trotsky or Walther Rathenau but true even in regard to Theodor Herzl, whose contempt for his Jewish contemporaries found expression in his diaries and whose ideal Jewish state was a modern liberal, Europe-like entity). The question again arises: was the alleged self-hate or "anti-Judaism" of these men based on nothing of any substance, and only on their flawed personal characters and misguided intellects, their "false consciousness"?

The Jewish rise in twentieth-century America, especially after 1945, has been even more impressive than in Europe. How could 3,000 years of negative and profoundly entrenched anti-Judaism in the Western tradition be so impressively weakened in about two generations, in a country long known for the fervent Christianity of its citizens? Should we conclude that this rise is but an epiphenomenon and that a violent American form of anti-Judaism is all too likely in the future? Or might we entertain entirely different conclusions--for example, that this Western tradition had inextricably but unmistakably both positive and negative implications for Jews, or that other

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forces (material ones, notably), can trump the influence of millennia-old ideas of “anti-Judaism”? Nirenberg seems to consider those questions as open-ended. At any rate, to repeat the point: he does not explore the positive with anything like the penetration and erudition that he explores the negative. Even granting that the negative deserves more attention, the imbalance is worth thinking about, especially insofar as what a slightly different balance might suggest.

One further example, while not a major one in the book, is useful in terms of the critical discussion that Nirenberg invites. Most of *Anti-Judaism* deals with pre-twentieth-century figures, but in the epilogue, he briefly and revealingly considers the case of another “anti-Judaic” Jew, Hannah Arendt. Her theories about the nature of antisemitism, her treatment of Adolf Eichmann, and her exploration of the “banal” nature of evil have attracted an extensive scholarly literature and much popular attention. The controversies date back to the 1960s, after the appearance of a series of articles in the *New Yorker* (afterward made into a book), but since those years they have regularly provoked ill-tempered exchanges.[3] Here as in previous chapters Nirenberg’s approach to the topic is irenic and certainly well informed. However, by the way that he frames his discussion, this reviewer at least sensed that instinctive distress and impartial analysis were at contest in his own mind.

This is not something that he would necessarily contest, given the points he himself makes. In the introduction he offers some revealing observations on the issue of objectivity in historical interpretation: “many see the mere invocation of the past as a symptom of special pleading (as for example, when histories of anti-Semitism or the Holocaust are invoked to silence criticisms of the State of Israel). Far too often they are right: history can easily become unreflective, pathological, impeding rather than furthering …[understanding]” (p. 11). He goes on, it should be noted, to argue that in a deeper sense this suspicion of using the past is mistaken and that “we cannot live without” historical reflection, but it must be of a more rigorous variety than is often seen.

For many observers Arendt’s name has become associated with an unforgivable sin, “blaming the victim,” since she argued that Jews had some responsibility for the hostility they encountered, and this issue of “co-responsibility” is one that seems also to bother Nirenberg. Certainly, the limits of her understanding of recent European history (or her misuse of it) are obvious to historians of the field today. However, it is also easily forgotten how widespread were attitudes similar to hers among highly intelligent and well-informed observers, Jews included, especially before the Holocaust. Zionists typically blamed the victim, insofar as they charged that galut Jews were objectively detestable insofar as their characters were believed to be deformed by their powerlessness and precarious existence among Gentiles.[4] A related hot-button issue was Arendt’s obvious disdain for the Yiddish-speaking Jews of eastern Europe, or *Ostjuden* (notably evident in her sardonic portrayal of the Israeli prosecutor at the Eichmann trial). But again this attitude was typical of the German-Jewish cultured elite (*Bildungsbürger*) of her generation. That eastern European Jews had previously fashioned their own richly derogatory vocabulary about German Jews, or *Yekkes*, is again something that tends to be little known or unappreciated today. Both sides had a pronounced proclivity to embrace self-affirming, hostile visions about one another, as well as about non-Jews.

Arendt’s description of Eichmann as a mediocrity, a shallow and characterless cog in the Nazi totalitarian machine, yet again evoked ferocious debate, but she continues to have admirers, and, even among those who recognize her faults, there are many who are uncomfortable with the facile and tendentious hostility that has sometimes been directed at her.[5] At any rate, we need to recognize how much the Eichmann “affair” represented a *Kulturkampf* within Jewish ranks. What many considered Arendt’s haughtiness and her overrefined intellectuality evoked a powerful emotional response, inextricably mixed into older resentments, but posing formidable obstacles to calm and clear-minded analysis.

In these regards, Nirenberg offers some thought-provoking observations, related to those cited

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above: “All of our prodigious cognitive and computational abilities are inadequate to a full comprehension of our complex world. As humans we remain heavily dependent upon certain tools of perception and conception that our cultural and biological heritages have taught us are useful. These tools … are indeed powerful, but … they reduce complexity to intelligibility by projecting our mental concepts onto the world…. [Even by the 1960s] Arendt clung to the views of Jewish reality and co-responsibility that she elaborated in the late 1930s ... (including the vast exaggeration of the Jews’ economic importance)” (p. 463). He adds that Arendt, even after the experience of Nazi rule, failed to grasp “the vast projective power of Nazi antisemitism” (p. 464).

Doubts must again arise here in regard to what Nirenberg seems to assume that “we” all know. Did Arendt have absolutely no legitimate reasons to “cling” to her views? Does antisemitism in fact have such “vast projective powers”? Is the concept of Jewish “co-responsibility” simply beyond respectable discussion? Could we not agree that there is far more to the concept of responsibility, whether collective or personal, than has been recognized in the various discussions of Arendt’s theories?

In fact, a number of historians and other scholars have questioned long-existing assumptions and facile assertions about German antisemitism, both in terms of its alleged power in recruiting Nazi followers in the early 1930s (economic issues and a loss of confidence in democratic institutions were more important), and in generating active support for mass murder (if Germany was composed overwhelmingly of antisemitic “willing executioners,” why didn’t Hitler and other Nazi leaders proudly and publically announce that they had ordered the murder of millions of Jews, rather than striving to keep those murders a secret?). How could it happen that this millennia-old, deeply embedded anti-Judaism was so effectively neutralized within a few generations, to be replaced among young Germans by a respectful interest in Jewish culture?

History is full of surprises, in ways directly relevant to the points made in *Anti-Judaism*. Few of those surprises are more striking than the departure in recent years of thousands of Israeli youth from Jerusalem to Berlin, largely because that youth views the German capital as one of the most tolerant in the world--unlike Jerusalem, where the growing ultra-Orthodox population has made life increasingly unattractive to worldly youth. Another surprise is that the most ardent, unqualified support for Israel today is to be found on the political right, especially the fundamentalist Christian right in the United States. These were elements of the population that a mere two generations ago held pervasively negative stereotypes about Jews. Criticism of Israel in the United States and Europe is now common on the left, where previously campaigns against the antisemitism of the Right were considered signs of the Left’s moral courage and soundness. Today, the fiercest hostility to Israel, with its spillover in attitudes to Jews living in other areas, has moved to the non-Western world, where Israel is widely considered an illegitimate remnant of Western imperialism and where Israel’s history of dramatic and violent triumphs, aided by Europe and the United States, over the non-European Palestinians and other Arab neighbors cannot be forgotten or easily forgiven.

The issues are not black-and-white, but Israel is real, a powerful actor in history, and thus criticism of it, whether judged fair or not, has some relationship to “objective” issues, as distinguished from being utterly divorced from reality. To be sure, hostility to Israel in the Islamic world has also picked up some of the fantastic anti-Jewish imagery of the European past, but that does not render that hostility identical or persuasively comparable to the hostility of the more extreme European antisemites. (The European and American Left, it should be said, has made little use of that imagery, however much anti-Judaism may be in the ideological genome of the Left and Right).

Nirenberg has already written a large and praiseworthy book, and it may be churlish to fault him for what he did not write, or to complain about topics he barely touched upon, most notably philosemitism. Still, it would have been valuable to see his impressive learning and analytical abilities applied to the last half-century with some of the richness and amplitude with which he has

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studied the centuries before modern times. Perhaps it is best to give him the last word: he has taken on something “dauntingly, even laughably, large.”

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